

The moral (im)permissibility of groping in virtual reality games

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ethics surrounding a recent incident of groping in the virtual reality game *QuiVR* (Bluteak, 2018; Belamire, 2016). This act is first framed as an example of an unwanted digitally-enacted sexual interaction (UDESIs). The moral permissibility of this act is then examined in light of Dunn's (2012) three criteria for a morally wrong act in a virtual world concerning avatar identification, consent, and the value of play. It is concluded that according to all three criteria, and in contrast to the amoralist approach, the act of groping in *QuiVR* is morally impermissible. Some considerations for future work in navigating the moral (im)permissibility of UDESIs across digital games are then offered.

Keywords

virtual reality; sexual harassment; virtual ethics; *QuiVR*

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article for *Medium*, Belamire (2016) gave a personal account of being groped by another player in the virtual reality (VR) game *QuiVR* (Bluteak, 2018). Belamire reported that when she entered online multiplayer mode and began communicating via voice chat, another player called 'BigBro442' began to follow her around in the game world and make rubbing, grabbing, and pinching motions towards her disembodied avatar's chest and crotch. These gestures did not stop even after she communicated her desire for them to do so, and eventually she quit the game.

Readers responded to Belamire's account in a variety of ways. Some empathised with Belamire's descriptions of these events as "real" and "violating" (n.p.), expressing dismay at BigBro442's actions. The incident was also picked up by several media outlets (e.g. Cross, 2016). In contrast, a number of readers were notably unsympathetic. Adopting an 'amoralist' approach (Patridge, 2011), some dismissed this event as inconsequential given its playful, digital context.

This emotionally-charged and divisive internet debate has, as one might expect, not produced any resolutions. However, it has produced some key questions that deserve serious scholarly attention. Is this act morally impermissible? If so, why? How does the fact that it occurred in a VR game, in which no 'actual' body was groped, influence our judgments about it? And how should players, developers, and the wider society respond to incidents like these given their apparently tenuous ethical status?

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This paper aims to shed some light on these questions. First, this act is understood as an ‘unwanted digitally-enacted sexual interaction’ (UDESI), a term introduced here to encompass a range of unwanted sexual behaviours that occur between two or more human users in a computer-facilitated environment. These acts, which range from virtual groping to rape, are enacted or performed in some way on an unwilling user or users within the digital environment via means that are textual (see Dibbell, 1998), graphical (see “Roblox ‘gang-rape’”, 2018) or, in the case of VR, quasi-embodied.

Next this paper analyses the ethics of this incident by drawing from Dunn’s (2012) three criteria for moral wrongness in virtual worlds. Dunn argues that there may be a certain *limited asymmetry* in virtual worlds—in other words, actions that are considered wrong when performed in the actual world (such as stealing or betrayal) are *sometimes* not wrong when performed in virtual worlds. For instance, stealing from another player in a digital game might not be wrong if stealing is a permitted element of the gameplay experience that players consent to.

In turn, Dunn (2012) suggests that actions that would be wrong in the actual world will also be wrong in virtual worlds when: (1) They occur in an environment where players identify strongly with their avatars, as the harm caused will not be offset by the virtual nature of the incident; (2) Consent is not given (perhaps due to ignorance); (3) They do not contribute to play (which is a value in itself), and are thus “gratuitous harms” (p. 264).

Does the act of groping described by Belamire (2016) meet these criteria? Close analysis reveals good reasons for thinking the answer is ‘yes’. This act occurred in a VR environment that specifically encourages avatar identification through enhanced realism and immersion. Consent was not provided, and play was hindered rather than furthered via this act. This paper further explores a variety of counter-arguments against these claims, including the suggestion that consent was implicitly provided upon entering the game given that some gaming culture norms permit UDESIs (such as ‘teabagging’— see Myers, 2017). However, these counter-arguments are ultimately found wanting, and the moral impermissibility of this act still stands.

This analysis has a number of implications for researchers in game studies. In particular, it has revealed that UDESIs may have a unique ethical status as impermissible acts that makes them distinct from, say, digital betrayal or violence. This is because in most digital contexts they have an inextricable link to avatar identification, are not (or cannot reasonably be) consented to, and are unlikely to further the play experience. The amoralist approach is thus on especially tenuous grounds when it comes to UDESIs, and particularly in VR contexts.

But there is still much more work to be done. Are UDESIs still ‘less serious’ than their physical-world counterparts? What other reasons might we have for thinking this act is (im)permissible? How does this act of groping in VR ethically compare to other UDESIs on other platforms? Should UDESIs be dealt with solely through in-game responses (Johansson, 2009) or should they be criminalised (Strikwerda, 2015; Danaher, forthcoming)? It is hoped that this analysis will help provide a solid foundation for future work in this important area as shared VR begins to play a greater role in our ludic digital lives.

BIO

Lucy Sparrow is a PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne, working in the field of Human-Computer Interaction in the School of Engineering. Her research lies in the applied ethics of multiplayer digital games, with a key interest in controversial play. With a bachelor's degree in Social Sciences (Psychology) and a master's degree in Philosophy from the University of Hong Kong, her research is primarily interdisciplinary, exploring the ways that we can and do negotiate the ethics of transgressive acts in multiplayer ludic digital environments.

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